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ABSTRACT

The informal, out-of-court methods used by newspaper editors to open up and to keep open the public meetings and records of their communities were investigated in this paper. The findings of a 1974 national survey of 352 city editors indicated that the size of newspaper circulation was a significant factor in determining the editors' attitudes toward dealing with governmental secrecy. Details of this survey are outlined, and the implications for the city official/newspaper relationship suggested by these findings are discussed in a section headed "Keeping 'em Honest." The importance of the development of diplomatic, yet assertive, strategies is stressed in "Training Reporters." Finally, the role of public opinion in local government reporting and the newspaper's own function in promoting official secrecy are examined. (KS)

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INFORMAL METHODS OF COMBATTING SECRECY IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

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INTRODUCTION

"Sue the bastards," a metropolitan city editor said when asked how the closing of public records and public meetings by local public officials can be fought. He expressed the anger of newspaper editors over the country at denials of access to public news, and his response was characteristic of their readiness to go to court to get public news.

Despite that readiness, most editors questioned in a national survey consider legal enforcement of access to local public news a last resort for newspapers. They prefer to use more informal means to keep public meetings and public records open. Most of the newspapers reached in the survey employed a planned policy aimed at educating their reporters, their readers and public officials in the importance of freedom of information.

Perhaps because of an increase in open meetings statutes, perhaps because of more active preventive work by newspapers, more than half of all the editors who replied saw local access problems as no worse than in past years. About 25 per cent thought such problems were decreasing and only 13 per cent thought them to be increasing. These last were the angry editors and their replies showed not just bitterness, but a willingness to attack secretive officials

and to take the dispute to court, if necessary.

Certainly their right to go to court has increased in the past decade. Records in the Freedom of Information Center, University of Missouri-Columbia, show that by early 1976 a total of 49 states had open meeting statutes and 48 had open records statutes. However filled with loopholes, these statutes give news media the right in certain situations to sue for access to public news.

Yet court action is not an easy decision for an editor. Only the wealthier papers can sue without weeping at the cost, and cost is just one problem. A lawsuit can turn a difference of opinion between a newspaper and a public official into overt hostility, making a rational solution difficult. And the news media must pick suits with care. If they don't win, they can be in worse trouble than before. Further, the law is slow. No suit can get a public meeting open in time for the last deadline.

Open records and open meetings statutes can be a help, but the local media, above all the local newspapers, must come up with their own methods of dealing with public officials who want to hide what they are doing. This paper is an attempt to discover the out-of-court methods used by newspaper editors to open up and keep open the public meetings and records of their community. The paper is based on a national survey of city editors and on Freedom of Information

Center research.

The survey was done in the summer of 1974. A questionnaire was sent to 352 city editors chosen randomly from the Editor and Publisher 1973 Yearbook. The papers represented were stratified by circulation. Questionnaires went to all 38 newspapers of more than 250,000 circulation; to half (108) of all papers of 50,000 to 250,000 circulation; to one in seven (1 4) of all papers of 10,000 to 50,000 circulation, and to one in seven (102) of all papers of less than 10,000 circulation.

Total replies, after a followup mailing, were 145. At least one-third replied in each of the four categories: 13, or 34 per cent, in the category of largest papers; 41, or 38 per cent, in the next largest category; 48, or 46 per cent, in the third largest; and 43, or 42 per cent, in the smallest. While the return is large enough for the major purpose of the survey--the discovery of informal methods of fighting official secrecy--it is small enough to raise the question of the attitude of those who did not reply. It seems probable that those who sent back the questionnaire are more interested in freedom of information matters than those who did not.

Because of the light return, plans for statistical review of the questionnaire data were dropped. The data were tabulated but cross-tabulations and tests for significance were not attempted. The data collected, however, do suggest

strongly that size of circulation is a significant factor in the editor's attitude toward methods of dealing with governmental secrecy.

This paper will be presented in three parts: first, the findings of the survey; second, a suggested program for newspapers to follow aimed at preventing or attacking official secrecy; and third, a list of conclusions.

BACKGROUND

Although more than half the editors who replied said they thought the problem of access no worse than in past years, the survey also showed that the problem is still very much here. Two out of three editors reported one or more instances in which a reporter had been denied access to public record or public meeting in the past year. Closed public meetings were more of a problem and aroused more concern than closed records.

The larger the paper, the more likely there had been a denial in the past year. Eighty-four per cent of the metros reported that a reporter had been kept out; only 43 per cent of the smallest papers reported a denial of access. It is possible that an aggressive news policy is a factor in the difference. Larger newspapers publish in larger, less personal communities, and they have the professional staff to go after public news. The smallest papers are often in

communities so closely knit that aggressiveness is bad manners.

Three-fourths of all the papers had standing instructions for their reporters on what to do when denied access to records of meetings. Some were elaborate and involved legal warnings and lawyers. Others were simple. "Basically, I tell them to go in, take a seat and dare them to throw him/her out," a metro editor said.

About half the newspapers "sometimes" worked during political campaigns to get local candidates to take a position on access to public news. A quarter "always" did and a quarter "never" did. There was no real difference in the replies from all sizes of newspapers.

About half "sometimes" informed new officeholders of the newspaper's attitude on access to public meetings and records. Thirty-five per cent "always" did and the rest "never." Size made little difference in this policy, too.

One of the major methods of attack on closed meetings mentioned by the editors was to get the information from a friendly source and run it. However, most of the editors replying were not satisfied with the news obtained from such sources. There was a difference in attitude according to the size of the editor's paper; the larger the paper, the less the editor trusted such versions of a meeting. Metro editors were dissatisfied with source-obtained news of meetings by a

margin of 3-1. The editors of the smallest papers were split evenly.

The traditional independence of newspapers was displayed in answer to a question that asked whether the editor had ever joined with another news medium to put pressure on secretive officials. Two-thirds of the editors replying had never done so, and the results were uniform across all sizes of newspapers.

The larger the paper, the more likely that the editor had gone to law to get public news. Among the smallest papers, only one editor in four had filed a suit or complained to a public prosecutor, and in the next smallest papers, only one in three. Among the next-to-largest papers (50,000 to 250,000) slightly less than half had resorted to law. But among the metros, two out of three editors had either filed suit or complained.

Seventy-five per cent of all editors replying reported trying, as a matter of policy, to educate their readers in FoI matters through news stories, columns, cartoons and other devices.

The survey suggested that community tradition had much to do with the degree of openness of officials with the public. One editor told of a long struggle to get the county auditor to release budget details. Finally, the auditor yielded to a state law mandating openness. Asked why he

fought so hard to keep preparation of the budget secret, he said, "It's always been done this way."

Local tradition can also be one of openness. A number of editors reported no secrecy problems in their community. Many were editors of the smaller papers. "This (secrecy) has never happened because we work together with government in our community. . . .I've gotten more good done this way," one said. Another replied, "In our small community we can't recall ever being excluded from a meeting. If it did occur, we would get very nasty in a front page story and editorial."

It was evident that the editors who replied believed they had the backing of their publishers, but only two bothered to mention the publisher as a factor. One said that without the publisher's support in fighting secrecy, the newspaper became a "paper tiger." Another, on a small paper, wrote in frustration, "This newspaper's efforts are minimal. I hope that there are few newspapers like this or all may soon be in trouble."

The questionnaire gave the editors additional space to report at length on: 1. prior instructions given reporters in case of official secrecy; 2. methods used to bring pressure on secretive officials; 3. methods used to acquaint readers with freedom of information issues; 4. what each considered the best way to fight official secrecy. This information will be used in the following section to suggest

a comprehensive program for preventing secrecy and for fighting it once it occurs.

KEEPING 'EM HONEST

The survey strongly indicates that the basic way to keep meetings open is to prepare for trouble before it starts. The thoughtful editor has laid the groundwork for a successful fight long before some stubborn official decides that information is his to release when and if he likes. The editor puts print and time into preparing his readers, his reporters and public officials for a war that may never come because of his preparation.

1. "Educating" the public is a phrase to delight a PR man's heart, but that is what newspapers must do to keep the doors open. If the public is to support the newspaper in getting public information, the public needs to be reminded frequently of the issue at stake--its own right to know what its servants in office are doing. "We tell them the right to know is not ours. . .but theirs," one editor said.

Editors find opportunities to run stories that keep the FoI issue before their readers. They publish editorials that stress the public's right to attend public meetings and to be present when decisions are made in the public's name. They run freedom of information stories, even those originating outside their circulation area. These editors consider

it news whenever a public body closes a meeting or an official closes a public record. It is news because it is atypical; the routine is an open meeting, an open record.

These editors seize the chance to praise in editorials local public officials who consider it their duty to make public news public--in contrast to those officials somewhere else who are keeping public information hidden. They interview cooperative officials and publish their views on the right of the public to know what is going on in government.

They encourage local press clubs and chapters of the Society of Professional Journalists, Sigma Delta Chi, to form FoI committees to monitor the openness of local officials. Joint Media Committees, such as that in Minnesota, can present a solid front of all news media to offending officials. These same committees can also do more for "education" of public, officials, and news people than can a single paper. The committee can provide speakers on FoI for parent-teacher groups and for service clubs.

During political campaigns, editors run definite statements of the paper's intention to press for open meetings, to demand justification for closed meetings, to demand prior warnings of unscheduled meetings. Often, the "editor's column" is the vehicle used.

Such articles require careful timing and perceptive writing to be effective. It makes no sense to alienate

those officials who are routinely cooperative while trying to warn the bad guys and "educate" the public. Further, as several editors said, the right-to-know issue is most effective when presented as a specific, local case. The local issue is more pertinent, more exciting and more readable than a similar issue in another state. But if the editor waits until a local issue arises, he may have lost the foundation for his case. There is no reason not to run both the general and the local FoI article.

2. There is no place to "begin" educating public officials, because the education should be constant; but the aggressive editor makes a special effort during local political campaigns. He works to make each candidate at least aware of the FoI issue and to get each on record as committed to open meetings, open records, open dealings with the public. He works to make right-to-know an issue in the campaign, to get the candidates to compete, in effect, as to which will be the most open with the public.

Reporters routinely ask candidates for their attitudes toward governmental secrecy, and the answers are printed. Lists of questions on local issues sent to candidates include one on openness. When the answers to these questions are printed, the candidates' commitment to openness is laid out for all to see.

After the election, editors write the winners to

congratulate them and to offer support for increased openness with the public, especially when the official is on a public body such as a city council or school board. The letters are an excellent place to remind the winner of his statements on open meetings made during the campaign, without making the reminder sound like a threat. They are also a good way to inform the new official of the provisions of the state open meetings-open records law.

Some editors, either alone or in company with a Sigma Delta Chi committee or other press group, appear before newly elected public bodies to seek adoption of formal policy statements supporting open dealings with the public and an acknowledgement of the public's right to know. Sometimes it is advisable for such statements to stand alone as policy. Later, if a problem of closed meetings comes up, the editor can help to draw up a formal policy on procedure. Such policies often include provisions for the decision to be made at an open meeting, with recorded votes of each individual member of the public body, and with a justification given. The policy sometimes adds a pledge to make prior announcement of unscheduled meetings and a promise that public business other than that for which a meeting was closed will not be discussed.

Some papers use a powerful device that makes the closing of a public meeting a political risk. The device is

simply a daily, routine listing of the meetings of public bodies in the paper's circulation area. A Tennessee paper uses a box on its second front page. The box begins with these words: "Because the people must know. This column is to inform the public when and where decisions are to be made in the public's behalf so that each citizen may attend meetings and speak his mind." Then follows a listing of meetings, times and places. The existence of the list induces caution in officials. None would like to see a notation in such a list that a meeting of his public body is closed to the public.

One editor suggested, if closed meetings become flagrant, the running of a scoreboard on page one: "Closed Meetings in Your Town This Week."

A number of editors warned that the newspaper must be careful not to alienate public officials by intimations that a meeting will be closed long before the officials actually have thought of closing the meeting. "These men aren't enemies and there's no reason to treat them like enemies until we have to," one said.

TRAINING REPORTERS

Many editors take real pains to train their reporters for FoI problems. Especially:

1. They make sure their reporters know the state

statutes on open meetings-open records. Some newspapers supply reporters with a copy of the statute to carry in their wallets.

2. They provide reporters with a standard procedure for trying to deal with closed meetings. Several followed the same plan for use when a reporter is asked to leave a meeting:

a. Advise the presiding officer formally that admission is sought. Protest; cite provisions of the state statute.

b. Get names of the attending members of the public body. Ask if the decision to close was made in open meeting? Where? When?

c. Ask if the decision to close was made by a vote or by the presiding officer. If it was closed by vote, who voted how.

d. Ask for justification for closing any meeting to the public. Try to pin them down for the record.

e. Make it clear that a story will be written about the closing of the meeting itself.

f. Keep calm. The paper wants an open meeting, not a vendetta. If the reporter loses his temper, he loses the fight. If a board member loses his temper, so much the better for the story on the closing.

3. If even after challenging a closed meeting the

reporter is still kept out and if he leaves, he is ordered by his editor to phone a news executive, who calls the paper's lawyer, who calls the reporter for details.

At least one paper went so far as to have its reporters carry affidavits with them to be filled out on the telephoned instructions of the lawyer. The paper's problems never reached this affidavit stage because its attorney and the attorney for the public body were able to work out access. The reporter got in at the next meeting, if not at the one that was denied him originally.

There was no agreement among the responding editors on whether the reporter should refuse to leave the meeting room when requested or ordered to do so. Some editors were defiant and told their reporters to sit tight. One went so far as to instruct his reporters to get the name and badge number of the police officer who would be called to escort him from the room. Often, of course, the meeting is simply "recessed" if the reporter will not leave, only to resume in another room behind a locked door.

A number of editors instruct their reporters to leave quietly after protesting and getting whatever information they can about the meeting to be closed. They then wait outside and question the members of the board as they emerge. Only two editors of the 145 who replied seemed ready to accept a closed meeting without further argument. One, who

reported no secrecy problems and who had no reason to pressure officials, had this instruction for reporters told to leave a closed meeting: "Stay the hell out of the way."

The question of whether the reporter should leave without help from the police seems to come down to how secretive the public body has been in the past. If there is a tradition of secrecy, a series of abuses, the editor may want to dramatize the closing by having the reporter defy the public body and invite arrest. But if the group has no history of prior closings, it may be wise for the reporter to leave--after protesting, of course.

If the reporter refuses to leave, he can turn a one-time closing into a feud that might have been avoided. Dramatic action by the reporter could make the public officials so defensive that they continue being secretive to justify the first closed meeting. Many a meeting has been closed capriciously and without precedent, only to be regretted the next morning when the front-page story comes out. A phone call or two and it blows over.

But there is another reason for editors to think twice before instructing reporters to sit out a request to leave a meeting. Defiance of government is not approved by many Americans, especially in that age group which reads newspapers. No matter how unnecessary the secrecy, no matter how illogical the justification given for the closing, many

Americans will see the refusal of the reporter to leave as arrogant interference with constituted authority. Their support is likely to go to the public body rather than to the newspaper. Only if the public body has a publicized history of secrecy and only if the newspaper is a trusted institution will the reporter's dramatics be likely to gain public support.

Every editor who replied would run stories on the closing. Several stressed publication of the names of the officials meeting privately. Many felt that single stories were sufficient to deal with the problem of a single closed meeting. Then, if the problem grew, their pressure would increase. Although many editors were concerned that too much pressure would worsen the situation, most emphasized that newspapers must place some pressure on public officials to keep public information public.

One said at an FoI meeting, "You've got to be aggressive about forcing the issue. You must show willingness to take it to court. Aggressiveness frequently is enough to force your way into meetings. They see the world doesn't collapse if the meeting is covered. One problem is that the press is too willing to accept closings."

Suggested ways to increase pressure included:

1. Editorials, naming the officials.
2. Keeping count of the number of closed meetings,

mentioning the new number in each new story of a closing.

3. Area roundups, in which the offending body's secrecy is contrasted with the openness of other public officials.

4. Letters from the editor to each member of a public body that has repeatedly met privately. The editor asks what was discussed, what was decided. Is each member still convinced that the secrecy was justified? The sending of the letter is run as one news story, another being based on the replies, or lack of replies.

5. Pictures of the closed door behind which the closed meeting is going on.

6. White space dummied for a multi-column head, with "Editorial" at the top and lower down a few lines to the effect that the space was reserved for news out of the closed meeting attended by. . . . Newspapers in India used this device to protest the recent censorship of the government of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. The device was quickly prohibited by Mrs. Gandhi's government.

7. Editors' attempts to end the war through personal contact.

"The main thing is to be tough," one editor said of attempts to end hostility between officials and the news media. "We make no deals on what the law says is open, but we respect what should be confidential."

Another expressed one reason to avoid suit if possible: "Too often a cause célèbre is made out of an issue. When a paper goes to court on this, all sorts of other motives crop up and it quickly can become a case of 'press prosecution.' We have found on a local level that no one person can resist persistent but out-of-court pressure for long."

But when nothing else works, when the paper has the money, a good case and a strong state statute to work with, most editors were ready to sue.

And when an end to the war, or at least a truce, arrives, the editors recommended enjoying the occasion quietly, not in print. Further, they strongly suggested continuing coverage of the once-closed meeting. One of the tragi-comedies of official life is to open up after hell-raising over closed meetings, only to find that nobody, including the newspaper, is interested enough in the meetings to attend them.

CONCLUSIONS

1. When fighting official secrecy, newspapers' arguments gain greatest force when they keep the high ground of the democratic ideal--a voting public able to govern itself because it is informed about public affairs. When working for open meetings, newspapers should argue in the name of the public, not in the name of the press. It is the public, of

which the press is only a part, that is excluded when a meeting is closed or a record book slammed shut. If newspapers argue only the press' right to attend public meetings, they are suggesting a right superior to the public's. Not only is the public unlikely to grant this superiority, it resents the suggestion that the press has a right it does not have. An argument of superior right based on the First Amendment might be effective in court, but it will not be well received by the readers.

Further, a sophisticated public official can attack such a claim as selfish--the newspaper sells news for a profit and is only agitating to get into those "necessarily" closed meetings so it will have something to sell. The same official, though, is put on the defnesive when he is shown to be excluding the public, the people who put him into office and whose money he is spending and whose authority he is using. Then the official must justify the closing; he cannot attack the public as he can attack the press.

The argument that the newspaper has a right to attend public meetings as a representative of the public is easier to support; some of the public may even back the newspapers since they seem to think no better of officials than of the press. Public officials won't agree; they naturally look on themselves as the public's representatives and they don't welcome the press as a competitor or as a watchdog of

government. The representation argument is not one to use with a mayor who wants to close it all up.

2. The closing of a public meeting or record must become NEWS, an atypical event. All news media must consider denial of access to public news an action contrary to routine, an extraordinary event for which extraordinary justification must be given. The burden must be on the official to justify denial, not on the newspaper to show why the meeting should be open. The presumption must be that all meetings and all records are open to the public unless clear reasons can be given for closing them.

This is not meant as an argument that all public business should be published. Experienced news people know of matters better left out of the paper, for the public benefit and to avoid terrible injury to innocent persons. But the choice of what is to be kept secret cannot be left to officials who may have a personal interest in secrecy.

3. Newspapers, like all news media, share in the blame for some governmental secrecy. Much of the reporting of public affairs is superficial, and it is inaccurate more often than newspaper editors and broadcast news directors want to admit. Every experienced editor has suffered the humiliation of hearing a respected, serious public official speak with professional contempt of the press' coverage of his office. Officials complain, with reason, of emphasis on

minor conflict, of a hunt for good guys and bad guys, of sheer ignorance of government, of carelessness, of a fascination for dramatic trivia, of significant material slighted or ignored because of its complexity, and inevitably of sensationalism. Public officials never explain how any reporter could sensationalize news as dull as most of that coming out of government. They are referring, of course, to the normal search for the unusual angle that newspapers follow in an attempt to make governmental news palatable to readers.

Naturally, many complaints are self-serving, but enough are valid to make it no wonder that even the ablest public officials are tempted to close public meetings when sensitive issues are to be discussed. Emphatically, the distrust of officials for the press is no excuse for them to close their shop to reporters, but American newspaper editors can do something about that distrust. Editors can re-examine governmental reporting with an eye to significance, and they can see to it that their government reporters are better prepared than they are now.

Journalism schools can take part blame for the poor preparation of reporters assigned to cover local government. Schools turn out eager young people who can write a breaking news story, more or less, but few of them can read a balance sheet and some of them don't know the difference between city

and county government. The schools are beginning to require more than basic economics and political science courses of their students; some are developing public finance and government courses adapted for journalists.

But the key to preparation lies with newspapers. The schools will give newspapers the kind of reporters they demand, eventually, and the papers can see to it that their reporters' training in government continues after they are assigned to a government beat. A reporter's understanding of city government grows rapidly once he begins covering practical affairs at city hall, but he will learn more, understand more, and be harder to satisfy if he reads the same books and professional magazines as the city manager and if he attends the same conferences and short courses.

Newspapers contribute to secrecy in another way, one that they can be proud of. Local reporting has become more aggressive in recent years. Newspapers now report areas of government that were ignored before. Local officials can no longer feel that the press will surely overlook information they would like kept confidential. The temptation to close public meetings and records in self-defense naturally becomes stronger. It is a rare mayor or city manager who sees it as much his duty to keep the public informed as to keep the city government running smoothly.

Officials are particularly tempted to close up when

the reporter's aggressiveness is extreme. Some reporters, notably younger ones, carry the unfortunate idea of "adversary of government" on to enmity. At times, such reporters show themselves openly contemptuous of public officials; their sole idea of news is the exposé. As gatherers of governmental news they have little value, and they injure the newspaper they work for. Not only do they poison the relationship between the paper and government officials, but they give the official a plausible argument for secrecy. The current fever for "adversary reporting"--with a vengeance--may work itself out, but while it lasts it is a danger.

Some newspapers also contribute to official secrecy by not screaming loudly enough at the closing of a public meeting or public record. Some papers do not feel the responsibility to bring governmental information to their readers; others are in a community where secrecy is routine and the paper hesitates to set the boat rocking. And for some papers, secretive public officials offer a news advantage over the competition, especially over broadcast competition.

Any reporter long on a beat has developed sources who will give him a version of what went on behind the closed door. If the competition has no such source, the newspaper can score a clear beat. While the paper may gain, its readers lose because the version offered may not be complete and it is difficult to check out. No matter how skeptical

the reporter, that friendly source's version smells of self-interest.

4. Stave off open war with officials as long as possible. Roaring fights with officialdom are exciting and they make entertaining copy, but they can be taken as symbols that the public is not getting the information to which it is entitled. Editors can go a long way to prevent war if they maintain a strong relationship with public officials and if there is no misunderstanding about the paper's reaction to secrecy.

It is worth an editor's time to find out, through personal contact, the real reason for a desire for secrecy. Although corruption is always a possibility, it is rarely the reason for a closed meeting. Much more often, officials close up to keep their options clear--if they are not on the record, they cannot be seen as changing their minds later. Or they want to avoid second-guessing from the public--it is simpler to present the public with a decision than to go through the trouble and political danger of public hearings and to listen to the arguments of "outsiders." They may want to prevent the organization of opposition before a policy is announced, or to conceal dissent which could weaken the force of a public board's eventual decision. They may want to sound out support for a proposal that could wither if it got early publicity. They may simply be high-handed

people to whom the concept of public right-to-know is foreign.

None of these is sufficient reason in our society for governmental secrecy, but even a sincere official, faced with possible community dissension and personal political troubles, will be tempted to offer the public a sudden policy, the product of a closed meeting--if they think they can get away with it. If these officials deal with a trusted paper that treats public affairs seriously and covers them competently, if they know the editor and if they know that the editor's reaction to secrecy will be a quick appeal for public support, then secrecy will be much less alluring.

While almost every editor who replied to the questionnaire alluded somehow to seeking public support in disputes over official secrecy, public support is not always forthcoming. Several editors showed disappointment and frustration.

The editor of one small Midwest paper said, "We continue to hit this issue (secrecy) hard, of course, in almost every way we can, but the effects are--to put it mildly--negligible. We have done all these things--especially front page editorials, news stories and subsequent editorials--and nothing seems to work."

Another said, "Unfortunately, most citizens are not very much concerned. There are, in fact, a good many people who believe public bodies should be allowed to meet in private

more or less at will."

But most editors exhibited at least the implicit belief that newspapers would have some public support, especially when a dispute is local and when its significance is clear.

"Make an issue of a case when what is being covered up is obviously important to the public. You can't stir up the public over a principle (right-to-know). What is being covered up must be important, significant," the editor of a metro said.

Some editors have attempted to make an individual official's secrecy an issue when he comes up for reelection--with mixed results. Several warned of officials reelected despite well-publicized histories of secrecy, officials who stayed in office hostile toward the newspaper but warmed by a feeling that their previous action had been validated by public vote. It is hard to imagine a worse situation for the public's right-to-know, and the possibility of such a horror suggests that newspapers should consider carefully before making an individual candidate's practice of secrecy a major issue in a political campaign.

With public support, newspapers will get public information whether officials want to give it or not. Without that support, newspapers will get what public officials want to give them, if the officials choose to be secretive. State

open meetings-open records legislation can help in gaining public backing, but ultimately the public's support will go to that group it trusts most. Fortunately for newspapers, public trust comes from the single function editors have the most control over--professional reporting.

The editor of a Midwest newspaper put it: "Good solid reporting is the best way to fight secrecy in government. But it is also necessary to use a strong open meeting or open record law occasionally. These do not replace good reporting; they supplement it."

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